

# THE EVOLUTION OF ATH

an interview with Elizabeth St John

by Anthea Courtenay

*Anthea Courtenay is a professional writer with a special interest in healing and complementary medicine. She has been an Associate Member of ATH since 1993, and believes that literature and the arts can be a potent force for healing.*

ATH was founded in 1983 by three women - Jane Lang, Ruth Noble and Elizabeth St John. All three were involved in some in both psychotherapy and movement, as well as healing. Since then, Jane Lang has left to become a full-time artist, Ruth Noble is still an ATH member specialising in healing and movement, and Elizabeth St John - though now taking a back seat - is still a strongly influential moving spirit for and within ATH.

Elizabeth did not originally set out to be a healer. A former kindergarten teacher who had brought up her two children in the USA, in 1974 she 'inadvertently wandered into' Maxwell Cade's biofeedback, healing and meditation classes in London. She attended these on and off for some ten years, and in 1979 was involved in his research. Helping to attach the Mind Mirror to the heads of famous healers like Rose Gladden and Bruce MacManaway while they worked gave Elizabeth 'a basic education in healing'. Still with no thought of becoming a healer herself, she began a training in Psychosynthesis.

Then, after one session with the healer Andrew Watson, 'I knew that that was what I was going to do!' She encouraged Andrew to start teaching and joined his courses in 1979-80. She began working as a healer, also using her biofeedback training to help clients to learn to relax and heal themselves. She and Jane Lang also took a course in Mental Colour Therapy with Lily Cornford, at the Maitreya School of Healing, along with Jane Lang and Ruth Noble. At the same time, the three friends were all teaching members of the Natural Dance Workshop (they belonged to a performance group called 'Spinsters'), and all three were involved in psychotherapy in some way.

I asked Elizabeth what prompted them to start ATH?

## *How ATH was founded*

**Elizabeth:** 'It started after the three of us went to the Mind Body Spirit Festival in 1983 and had a look at the healing organisations. We talked to the people, who were really nice, and had healings from them at the various stands. But we realised that we actually belonged to a completely different generation, not so much in age as in our training, education and outlook. We decided the "white coat" way was not for us - that the healer's way at that time of needing to appear respectable, allied to wearing white coats, was out-dated. (The only other organisation with our kind of thinking was founded at exactly the same time, by a generation of people in their 40s, and that was the College of Healing who were up and running by '84.)

'Afterwards we sat down and said, "What is it that we don't see in these other organisations that we would like to see?" and from that we drew up what we would like in an organisation that we could belong to. The first thing that came up was a decent training course. We had looked at several, and decided that the majority of them were inadequate, particularly in terms of experiential group work and hands-on practice.

'Another thing we didn't see in other organisations was clear client-healer boundaries - this has changed, of course: almost everything that made us decide to found ATH has changed in the other organisations. But it was important to us, since all of us were steeped in different forms of psychotherapy, and visiting lots of different healers. I don't think we ever queried the great healers, because they were so focused on healing people that they didn't have time for games, conscious or unconscious! But we saw that the general run of healers were not very conscious of their own projections on to their clients, and we thought that interfered with the healing process - not in terms of channelling the energy, but in terms of the kinds of things they would say to people.



'We decided we didn't want to be a charity; we wanted a professional body. I consulted my father who recommended basing it on the on the very simplest form of organisation - the cricket club! So that's what we did, with four officers and a quorum.

### ***Early Training Courses***

'The first thing we decided was to run a training course. We had great fun. The three of us ran it, each giving it from our point of view, and we invited in an osteopath to give a clearer touch. We held it at Neal's Yard Therapy Rooms one weekend a month for 9 months, and one Sunday a month when we had clients coming in knowing there was going to be group work with them.

'We had experiential work within the group as its base, and hands-on practice with clients. And we had supervision between weekends - supervision was unknown in the healing world at that point. This came from the psychotherapy background, and was particularly important to Ruth. So we filled in all the gaps in the existing healer trainings.

'Our background in movement was also influential: we reckoned that movement work gives people boundaries with touch, particularly in energy work, particularly with our approach, because we all trained by people who trained with the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop, which was heavily Gestalt oriented.

'In 1984 Denis Havilland asked us to join the Confederation of Healing Organisations [CHO]. Later, by the time I came to sit on the CHO committee formulating the NVQ training I had a very good idea of how at least 50% of the available training courses were run, because we'd studied them.'

'We repeated the course once, drawing ATH members from our graduates, and set up a professional register and insurance. The third course didn't fill, but at that point I met Celia MacNab (now Weller) who ran her own publicity company, Expanding Horizons. She had great vision, and was excellent with publicity. We ran three courses with her guidance, expanding the curriculum and bringing in other ATH members, so each weekend had a different teacher. They included Delcia McNeil, who joined ATH fairly early on.

'When we set up we decided that so few people in healing had the kind of approach that we wanted in fellow members that everyone wanting to join had to be known, together with their work, to two members of the teaching body. Everyone who took the training course would automatically be considered for membership. Particularly with Celia, we were really tough with people as to whether they were ready to do hands-on work or not. We did things like assessment, that are now in the NVQ, and through all the courses we had supervision, with appointed tutors.

### ***The Neal's Yard Clinic***

'The last course we ran as ATH was in 1989. I was away in Java, and it didn't really get set up right - but at the same time other healing organisations were offering more and more forward-looking courses, under the CHO influence. So by 1989 there was a lot more competition. And around then Celia closed her publicity organisation, because she was moving on in her life. So we agreed that each of us who felt like it would run courses. Delcia\* was gearing up for her courses, which would have a slightly more psychotherapeutic orientation.

*\*[Delcia McNeil founded The McNeil School of Healing in 1993, which became the Rowan School for Healing and Personal Growth with Kate Williams as equal partner in 1999, and is now the Rowan School Network - promoting healing and personal growth.]*

'One of our principal aims was not just to offer professional courses (and at the time we started ATH healing wasn't regarded as a profession) and to give healers a better understanding of themselves, but also to educate the general public, about healing as preventative medicine. The public needed to know that healing is for more than just when you are dying and have lost all hope. That underpinned why we started the drop-in clinic at Neal's Yard, a few years later, to offer healing as a preventative therapy. If you can give preventative dentistry, why not preventative spiritual healing?



'The Clinic ran for several years in the 1990s, providing one lunchtime slot and one in the early evening. It was at the right place at the right time, and it was great fun. It also gave us a central meeting point where students would come in from all the different courses and acquire at least a common outlook through the clinic. And it was fascinating seeing people coming in from other trainings with very different attitudes from the ones who ad come through ours. Because healing had acquired a higher profile and more respectability in the '90s, many more people were coming from the orthodox healthcare professions, like occupational therapists and social workers. They were absolutely clear on their boundaries, *absolutely* clear!! But at the same time they were much less person-centred, which you have to be in spiritual healing. And maybe they learned that in the clinic - how to just be with someone, and not apply your technique to them.

### ***The ATH healing philosophy: 'being with'***

'This is an essential point, I think. Even though you have learned healing techniques, there is a difference between seeing your client and applying even your healing technique: to my mind, you simply have to *be with* that person. Then you may use the technique with them, or maybe not. That is a very difficult transition for people to make who are already health-care professionals - giving clients space to find themselves. But I have seen it in surgeons and GPs, nurses - not many, they don't have much opportunity or time! And of course, when someone is really, really ill, your first thought is to help with the pain and distress.

'I think we have got the essence of it in the CHO healing NVQ formulation that we spent so many years putting together - that your *attunement is not just to the healing power but to the person in front of you*. Lawrence LeShan has written about it brilliantly. It was Gabriel Roth [*the American teacher of dance as a healing art*] who summed it up for me in one of the early residencies I did with her. She said, "Just remember that the most wonderful thing you can do for anyone is just be there. Because nobody gets the attention they crave!"

**Anthea:** Is that what's called 'unconditional love?'

**Elizabeth** (laughing): We don't like words like that!! Because most people want to be sympathetic, and that's often the worst thing you can do. Unconditional presence, perhaps. But it is something along those lines that healers need to learn - perhaps you need to learn it in all therapies, and healing in particular, because it's so mysterious to most people

**Anthea:** Is it mysterious to you?

**Elizabeth:** I don't think so. I think it's only mysterious in that we haven't got the vocabulary to describe it - although the new physics does has a vocabulary to describe it. I see healing as tapping into the cosmic wave, which is there to tap into. And it comes through the heart centre.'

### ***Current developments***

With a number of family commitments, Elizabeth has twice stepped back from her central role in ATH.

**Elizabeth:** 'I stepped out and then found that I hadn't stepped out, in the sense that people still thought I was boss. Then I stepped out yet again: I was doing nearly everything, but very incompetently. I didn't have the time or the skills to do the admin, or the newsletter, and for a time we had no treasurer. I am primarily an ideas person rather than an admin person - I have the enthusiasm for ideas, the energy work, if you like but I need others to put them into practice. So I thought if I stepped out completely,

and did not attend any meetings of any kind, then I'd create a vacuum which had to be filled. And that's what happened.

**Anthea:** Where would you like the ATH to go now?

**Elizabeth:** 'I don't think that's any of my business! ATH was the yeast, and I think that yeast, because it works energetically, did more than any to change the profile of healing. The first thing was to demystify healing, the second was not to institutionalise it, as so often happens - but our presence, small though it was, on the CHO committee was absolutely vital in formulating healer trainings in the first two years. Then of course other people came in and took it on from there.

'So in a way the ATH has served its purpose. But it seems important to the other people involved that it is there, and that it is more than just a professional register. I think again, going back to the very beginning, it's where likeminded people can meet each other periodically. This perhaps doesn't happen enough, partly because everyone who belongs to ATH is very, very busy, which I take as an excellent sign.

'One thing I would like would be to see a good post-graduate programme going with refresher courses. I do think, with the collection of experience and ideas and talent that ATH members have, we could run post-grad type refresher courses which should knock the spots of whatever other organisations are offering. Another thing we could do is for more ATH members to participate in workshops that other members are offering. That would work very well, that would be another way for more participation.

'Maybe the Open Day will lead to something - certainly the last one acted as a ferment and cement at the same time.'

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## HUMOUR AND HEALING

'Only the ridiculous survive' (graffito)

by Louise Taylor

*Louise Taylor, who joined ATH last year, is also known as Iona Jette, comedienne and poet. She recently performed at The Whole Life Festival, was showcased by Apples & Snakes at the Battersea Arts Centre, and has a 'proper job' as resident compere at The Poet's Kitchen in Richmond - an informal, spontaneous and experimental venue for poets, comedians, writers and musicians, particularly women.*

Comedy and sex are close allies. In that burst of laughter you mimic the moment of orgasm. Like sex, comedy is co-creative, something has to trigger that pleasure and it is often the ridiculous. Laughter clears the spleen chakra, alters the physiology, relaxes the body and uplifts the spirit and there's a whole variety of ways of being taken to that place of 'whoopie'!

In becoming a comedienne I found a spiritual pathway of the heart. I learnt that to go on stage requires the abandonment of the ego and the ability to work holistically with all the chakras. I have to trust to my memory, to the moment, to being able to be in the flow and in touch with the spiritual warrior. To improvise requires that you let go of the script and be spontaneous; to work the audience and to deal with hecklers needs the inner strength of the spiritual warrior to exercise discipline and still hold the space and your centre on stage. In fact all those things we are exhorted to do by spiritual gurus of many ilks.